

Shoebill: how to see one

Part of the Shoebill's survival strategy appears to be to live in areas which are generally difficult of access or somewhat politically unstable. Currently the easiest place to see this much sought-after bird is in Uganda, where it has been recorded from a number of sites. By far the most reliable of these is on the White Nile in Murchison (Kabalega) Falls National Park. President Museveni twitched it here and, incidentally, made his boat go round a second time for closer views. Murchison Falls National Park is accessible from Masindi, which in turn is only a few hours drive from Kampala. There is no public transport to the Park, but bush-taxis can be hired in Masindi or it may be possible to arrange lifts with tourist groups from the Masindi Hotel, especially at week-ends. There is basic accommodation at Paraa Bandas (bring your own food and liquid refreshment), or at the more luxurious Rabongo bungalows. Camping is also possible at Paraa. From Paraa, it is a short walk to the south bank of the White Nile and the bird can sometimes be seen from the jetty there. A launch makes regular trips 11km upstream to the spectacular

Murchison Falls where the Nile is forced through a gap merely 10 m wide. Rock Pratincole *Pratincola nuchalis* is common on the rocks here. Below the Falls, there is a narrow strip of papyrus on both banks and two pairs of Shoebill regularly inhabit this area. The boatmen are aware of the importance of the bird and make a special effort to approach them slowly for the benefit of photographers. The narrowness of the papyrus marshes limits the birds to linear territories, and should you be unlucky enough to dip on the trip to the Falls and back, it is probably worth hiring the launch to make a further trip down river towards Lake Mobutu (Albert).

Other potential sites are much more difficult of access and visibility even if you can get in. These include some of the swamps of the Sudd in southern Sudan, the Moyowosi-Kigosi swamp in southwestern Tanzania, the Bangweulu Swamp in northern Zambia and the Akagera National Park lakes in Rwanda. In all these and other areas information is relatively sparse and all records are wanted. ☺

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